

## 1939 Annual Report

### XII 1939

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63

### XII 1939 \* FROM THE REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT IN CHARGE, Mr. ALAN LOMAX

\* From the Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1939, pp. 218–225.

Interest in the work of the Archive of American Folk-Song has grown steadily in recent years as part of a developing consciousness of the significance of a native culture. Recently, however, this interest has been intensified and the Archive has experienced a correspondingly rapid growth both in the direction of acquisition of new material and in demand for this material from a wide variety of sources.

Since last year's report was written, 1,103 field recordings and commercial records of folk and pseudo folk-songs have been accessioned along with a considerable body of field notes, photographs, moving-picture films, and other pertinent material. It can be estimated that the Archive comprises over twenty thousand items of American folk-music, representing most of the types of tunes to be found on this continent, and in some cases, at least, defining important types. General use of acetate blanks, along with better field equipment and field-recording techniques, has resulted in an improvement in the acoustic characteristics of these field recordings until some records compare favorably with commercial records made under ideal acoustic conditions. Not only has the Archive grown in sheer size and in terms of improved recording technique, but the range of its material has been greatly expanded. Sidney Robertson, Alan Lomax, John Lomax, and

## Library of Congress

Herbert Halpert have explored fields of foreign minority music with recordings of Finnish, Serbian, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, Cuban, and Mexican songs and dances. There has been a rapid development, too, of a feeling for the documentary record. In addition to extensive field notes, movies, photographs, etc., every possible opportunity has been taken advantage of to record, along with the songs, what the singers, themselves, had to say about them. In this way the songs are set in a context of the speech and opinion which is their normal environment.

In later portions of this report a somewhat detailed statement of the Archive's collaborative work with numerous individuals and institutions outside the Library will be set forth, but it is important here to note how the Archive during the past year, has sponsored and implemented five extremely fruitful recording projects carried on by other government agencies. Recording equipment, materials, and criticism have, in a given instance, been furnished a field worker from a governmental agency in return for which his field recordings were deposited in the Archive. The agency then received a set of duplicates of the records. This plan has been carried out successfully with the Farm Security Administration of the Department of Agriculture, the Writers' Project, the Folk Arts Committee, the Music Project and the Recreation Project of the WPA, with the cooperation of the Radio Broadcasting Division of the Department of Interior, which has furnished both the labor and the equipment for making the sets of duplicates. The same type of relationship has been established with many local collectors, who have generously guided Archive recordists to singers they had discovered. Finally, it must be added that commercial recording companies, notably the Columbia Recording Company, have generously presented the Archive with selected groups of records that had bearing on the Archive's field of interest. It is to be expected that the future growth of the Archive will continue in the direction of further such collaborative projects.

On the side of service, activity has been largely confined to response to inquiries about folk-songs and to playing records for a great many visitors. Although a certain number of duplicates have been made with the help of Mr. 65 Shannon Allen of the

## Library of Congress

Department of Interior, in response to requests from singers or folk- f lorists who furnished material, a great many more requests for duplicate records have come in than could be handled because of lack of equipment and of staff. Three notable exceptions can be noted, however. The British Broadcasting Company requested help from the Librarian of Congress in the preparation of three thirteen-week programs on American music broadcast over its nation-wide government hook-up. John A. Lomax chose the records, furnished the commentary, and songs or fragments of songs were dubbed off Library originals for the records finally used on the programs. In the same way through the National Broadcasting Company a set of dubbings was made for the French Broadcasting Company to be used in a governmental program on discovering America, prepared by the distinguished French radio commentator, M. Berger. Finally, the Columbia Broadcasting Company has asked the Archive's collaboration in preparing and presenting a twenty-four week program on American folk-music for The American School of the Air for 1939–1940. This program is now in progress under the direction of the assistant in charge of the Archive. Work in the field during the year is briefly summarized in the paragraphs that follow:

### Michigan, August to November 1938 — 249 Twelve-inch Acetate Records

A two and a half month reconnaissance survey of folk-music in Michigan brought into the Archive a group of about a thousand songs, lumberjack, lake sailor, Irish, Southern Negro, Finnish, Serbian, Polish, Canadian French, German, Hungarian, and Croatian. Dr. Ivan Walton of the University of Michigan, Dr. E. C. Beck of the Michigan State Teachers College, and Mr. Howard Newsome, Director of the Federal Writers' Project of Michigan, were of assistance in locating singers.

66

After ten days spent in Detroit recording a few of the many types of foreign minority music still orally current there, notably records of Serbian diple and douduc players, I visited briefly a few of the fine lumberjack singers Dr. Beck had located near Mt. Pleasant. It

## Library of Congress

was then arranged for me to join Dr. Walton, the authority on lake sailor songs, at Beaver Island, Michigan. There he introduced me to two remarkable Irish singers, Dominick Gallagher and Johnny Green. The latter, one of the most amazing ballad singers who has turned up in America, recorded over a hundred come-all-ye ballads—forecastle, lumberjack, lake sailor, Irish, popular, etc. Since that time he has written that he has recalled a hundred and fifty more. The Beaver Island singers were all Irish and ended their songs in the fashion described by Barrie as “parlando rubato.” Indeed, wherever a lake sailor or lumberjack of fifty years or over was recorded this type of ending was noted.

A visit to Posen, Michigan, brought the Library an interesting collection of Polish ballads and fiddle tunes. Many of the latter had been learned from local fiddlers when the Polish settlers arrived and now among young people are passed under Polish names as Polish tunes. Here, as all over Michigan, even including Detroit, a great revival of interest in old dance forms was in evidence. Local bands were expected to be able to play national music, jazz, and American square-dance music.

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan proved to be the most fertile source of material. After six weeks of recording a mass of lumberjack, Finnish and French folk-songs, I felt that there was material enough in the region for years of work. Near Newberry, Munising, Greenland, and Ontonogan, it was comparatively easy to find lumberjack singers. Everywhere through the Copper Country and south of it, Finnish singers generously furnished me with more material than I had time to record. And in Champion and Baraga I found French ballad singers who still enjoyed ballad fests that lasted all night long.

67

### **New York City, December 25, 26, 1938—15 Twelve-Inch Acetate Records**

With the help of John Hammond, organizer and mainspring of the New Masses swing concert at Carnegie Hall, and the Allied Recording Company, who lent their machine for two days, I was able to make for the Library recordings of five of the most remarkable

## Library of Congress

Negroes in American music: Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, and Jimmie Johnson, the “boogie woogie” pianists; Pete Jimmie Johnson, the blues pianist and composer; and Saunders Terry, the blind harmonica player from North Carolina. These recordings were documented in the fashion described above and represent the very finest performances of these Negro folk-artists.

New York City, May, 1939—80 Twelve-Inch Acetate Records

Captain Dick Maitland, aged 82, of Sailor's Snug Harbor, in two days of singing filled nineteen records with his version of the clipper ship shanties. Not only were his melodies what Joanna Colcord calls “a generation older than most of those in print,” but Captain Dick explained in his terse and seamanlike fashion just how each shantey was used aboard ship.

Aunt Molly Jackson, formerly of Clay County, Kentucky, and a sort of walking encyclopedia of the oral traditions of her people, recorded her singing biography for the Archive on some sixty-one records. Story led to song and song to story. There are representatives of every type of tune sung in the mountains—English ballads, feud ballads, banjo tunes, fiddle tunes, sacred tunes, love songs, etc., with an exhaustive discussion of each type by Aunt Molly, who can tell stories as well as she can sing.

California Folk-Music Project, San Francisco, California — 72 Twelve-Inch Acetate Records

This project, which operates as a part of the WPA of California, under the 68 sponsorship of the Library of Congress and the University of California has completed 160 recordings, of which only a part have been copied for deposit in the Archive of California Folk-Music, Photographs of singers and of folk musicians during performance have been made, working drawings of the great variety of folk instruments found in California have

## Library of Congress

been completed, and a catalog of the material has been maintained. Sidney Robertson, supervisor of the project, says in part:

Because almost no exploration of the field of traditional music has ever been undertaken in California, it seemed advisable to define the intention of the project in the widest possible sense. "California" folk music has therefore been understood to mean any traditional music—song or dance tune—now current in California; a few items from other states which dealt with California life or history have been included. The plan was to take a rapid cross-section of traditional music among the minority groups as well as among the folk of Anglo-Saxon antecedents, with the expectation that in relatively few instances would enough material be recorded for research. However, miners' fiddle tunes and songs stemming directly from the pioneers have turned up in far greater number than expected; in addition three good ballad singers, one from Iowa, one from Wisconsin and one from Kansas, the last two in California for more than thirty years, have added excellent material. The Armenian folk songs from the mountainous region of Van, and the Gaelic songs from the Hebrides are unique recordings. Much interesting Portuguese music from the Azores and a certain amount of Spanish-California material are included.

To date 75 disks, about 250 titles, have been recorded by Americans whose native language is English. It includes some music not strictly traditional such as Barbary Coast ragtime, which is, however, necessary to any study of the oral tradition.

The music of various minority groups contains 85 disks and 360 titles so far. It includes some Dalmatian instrumental music of great interest, a little Sicilian, Norwegian, Spanish (from the Asturias), Costa Rican, Negro and Mexican music. There are in addition religious folk songs by Russian Molekani, and some Icelandic hymns and boat songs. There are seventy titles in the Spanish-Californian group and eighty in the Portuguese.

Expedition of the Folk Arts Committee of the Works Progress Administration in the Southern States, Spring, 1939— 419 Twelve-Inch Acetate Records

## Library of Congress

Mr. Herbert Halpert of the Federal project of New York City did a remarkable piece of field work for his two co-sponsors—the Library of Congress and the Folk 69 Arts Committee of the WPA—in his three months in the South. His itinerary, planned in collaboration with the Music, Writers, and Recreation Projects of the WPA, carried him across a great part of the region southeast of the Mississippi. The tunes recorded represent most of the types of folk tunes current in the South—English and Scottish ballads, indigenous ballads, dance tunes, white spirituals, Negro spirituals, work songs, blues, game songs, creole songs from New Orleans, and Cuban songs from Florida. Much of the material was thoroughly documented by workers on the Arts Projects and this documentation was supplemented by Mr. Halpert's interesting questionnaire, the answers to which were in great part recorded with the songs. Mr. Halpert visited the informants who had supplied Mellinger Henry, Elihu Sutherland, Richard Chase, Professor A. P. Hudson, George Pullen Jackson, and other folk-lorists with material, and recorded their valuable variant texts and tunes. Throughout his trip the workers and supervisors of the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Music Project assisted him; in Wise County, Virginia, Emory Hamilton and J. T. Adams; in Mississippi, Miss Eri Douglas, Miss Jerome Sage, Miss Sybil Macdonald, Gene Holcomb, and Abbott Ferriss; in New Orleans, Mrs. Jeanne Wogan Arguedas; in Jacksonville, Miss Zora Neale Hurston; on the Edisto Island, South Carolina, Chalmers Murray. Mr. Halpert says in part:

The trip accomplished several things. There is first the solid fact of well over a thousand items collected representing most sections of the South and a large number of the types of material found there. Secondly, a useful service was performed by recording many of the folk-song informants from whom texts without tunes had been published. In some cases, too, private collectors with unpublished collections have had some of their songs recorded, thus enabling more satisfactory publication should they achieve that state. Third, important efforts of the Federal Arts Projects of the WPA towards the scholarly investigation of American cultural materials is here concretely expressed. The success of the expedition indicates how profitable this widespread activity on the part of the government agencies is.

**JOHN A. LOMAX, THE SOUTH, FEBRUARY TO JUNE—142 DISKS**

Musically and acoustically this is one of the best groups of records accessioned in the Archive. The Honorary Consultant and Curator of the Archive, John A. Lomax, and Mrs. Ruby Terrill Lomax made a criss-cross trip of 6,502 miles through the South, recording Mexican and cowboy songs in south Texas, Negro section gang songs from Weirgate, Texas, Negro gang songs in the penitentiaries, and road gangs of Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida, and South Carolina, Negro spirituals, game songs and ballads in Alabama and South Carolina, and white ballads, hymns and spirituals in Louisiana, Texas, and South Carolina. "Much of the material was new to me," writes Mr. Lomax, "though in many instances we recorded variants of folk-songs which I had previously recorded from other singers." Many local people were helpful in locating material: Dr. Richard of the State Teachers College in Kingsville, Texas; Sister Joan of Arc of Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio; Herman Weaver, in Merryville, Louisiana; Rudy Pickens Tartt, in Livingstone, Alabama; Genevieve Chandler, in Murrell's Inlet, South Carolina; and Ben Robertson in Toccoa Falls, Georgia. Among the many singers who furnished fine material Frank Goodwyn, Beale Taylor, Henry Truvillion, Doc Reed, Vera Hall, and Emma Floyd certainly should be mentioned.

**SPECIAL SKILLS DIVISION, FSA ADMINISTRATION—159 TWELVE-INCH ALUMINUM DISKS**

Under the supervision and guidance of Charles Seeger, at the time director of music in the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Division, numerous songs were recorded in various parts of the country for use in the work of that agency. The recordings were made during 1936 and 1937 by Sidney Robertson, Margaret Valliant, Lawrence Powell, Charles Seeger, and others. They were duplicated, cataloged, and indexed by Mr. Seeger, and in 1939 the originals were 71 deposited permanently in the Archive, while a set of duplicates was retained by the Special Skills Division of the Federal Arts Program for use in their field



## Library of Congress

service work. The material is extremely varied in scope-foreign minority songs from the lake states, lumberjack songs, Negro spirituals, southern mountain hymns, banjo tunes, ballads, fiddle tunes, etc.

Margaret Valliant has facilitated the acquisition of 20 twelve-inch acetate recordings she made in the Southwest in the spring of 1939 for the Farm Security Administration. A number of records have been made in the Archive from the singing of visitors who knew interesting material: Blaine Stubblefield, Frank Melton, Ferdinand Morton and others. Over a hundred duplicates have been made from time to time for special purposes, and in this work Shannon Allen of the Department of Interior's Radio Broadcasting Division has been most cooperative. The helpfulness of RCA Victor, Columbia Phonograph Company and Decca Record Corporation has greatly facilitated the commencement of a bibliography of commercially recorded folk-music. Special acknowledgment must also be made to Jack Capps, R. P. Wetherald, John Hammond, Art Satherley, Frank Walker, and J. Mayo Williams in this respect.